

Reflecting On Doors

The fellow who introduced himself as a public entrepreneur—a creator of advocacy groups—persisted. “You didn’t get my point,” he insisted, although we did. Ian was one of the presenters in the session, a no-nonsense South African. “You’re knocking on an open door,” he replied, a little impatiently. Such an apt metaphor: funny that I never heard it before.

Funnier still how metaphors converge.

An hour later, in another session, I was presenting and Ian was listening. (We scratch each others’ backs in academe, although sometimes we draw blood.) The conference was at the Harvard Business School, and the facilities were impeccable. Why, then, did that door have to slam so loudly every time a person came into the room. “Could someone please fix that door to stay open,” I asked, and carried on.

Don was the commentator in our session. He and I see things differently. As I put it later in responding to his criticisms, drawing on another apt metaphor I heard somewhere, Don is a “mirror” person while I am a “window” person. In fact, I wondered out loud whether it was fair for a mirror person to be criticizing a window person, at least for missing the reflection.

Don mostly ignored the content of my presentation, to draw on the experience at hand. He wanted the door closed, he said, preferring the feeling of intimacy, while there I was, exploiting my position at the front to keep the door open. He didn’t use that

favorite mirror label for we window people—“insensitive”—but his point was clear enough.

Well, I think he had it reversed.

You see, the trouble with mirror people is that they often fail to see past their own reflection. (Of course, the trouble with window people is that we often have to hide behind some glass—a camera or another pane.) In that room, I thought I was the sensitive one. I actually preferred the door closed, being aware of the same intimacy. But I noticed the effect on the audience every time that door slammed, while Don apparently did not—too busy consciously reflecting, I guess.

But it didn't seem appropriate to point this out to him. Why knock on a closed mirror?

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